

INVITATION TO BCC TO JOIN INTERNATIONAL SHARED SOCIETIES PROJECT

INTRODUCTION

A new five year project began last autumn, and an invitation was extended to Belfast City Council (BCC) to join as a partner organisation. The decision was not to join at that time, but we are hoping that fresh consideration can now be given to the idea. The purpose of the project is to bring together six countries to work collectively to create a deeper understanding of the idea of a shared society. In all six countries the entanglements of history, politics, ethnicity and culture make it difficult to achieve a true equality between social groups, but in all six there are people working towards that end. This project brings together theorists from universities with practitioners who have to contend with real life cultural conflict on a day-to-day basis. The organisers would like to have Northern Ireland involved in the project: academics and also people who have the practical task of implementing policies in a divided society. The academics who were first contacted were asked to suggest a practitioner organisation. They suggested BCC as an organisation with much to share from its experience in trying to create a shared city ethos, and BCC would still be the first choice.

WHO ELSE IS INVOLVED?

Apart from Northern Ireland the other partners come from:

Belgium, a prosperous member of the European Union, but a country with three very distinct internal cultures: the Dutch-speaking region of Flanders in the north, the mostly French-speaking Wallonia region in the south, and the German-speaking cantons in the east. In 2010/11 Belgium did without a government for 589 days.

Germany, the heart of European social democracy, which is now struggling with issues arising from immigration. This is not just a recent phenomenon. In the 1960s and 1970s, the German governments invited "guest workers" (*Gastarbeiter*) to migrate to Germany for work in the German industries. The largest immigrant group came from Turkey, and some generations on there are unresolved issues about the extent to which the host country and the immigrant communities experience a shared sense of citizenship.

Bosnia-Herzegovina The Bosnian war concluded in 1995 with the signing of the Dayton Accord, but since then the country has experienced an unhappy form of 'peace without reconciliation'. A complex constitutional architecture has led to the segregation of Bosniak, Serb and Croatian communities, but the Nansen Dialogue Project has created links extending across Croatia, Bosnia Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo and Macedonia.

Israeli/Palestinians The Middle Eastern partnership in this project is not between Israelis and the Palestinians in the West Bank or Gaza, but rather with the Palestinians who live within the state of Israel. The Givat Haviva Centre, which is the official partner organisation, was created in order to build solidarity between Israeli peace activists and the Palestinian community within Israel's borders. It is a recipient of the UNESCO Prize for Peace Education for its longstanding work in promoting Jewish-Arab dialogue and reconciliation.

Kosovo In Kosovo the stew of ethnicity and national identity and has been bubbling on the back burner ever since the new republic was created in 2008. There are those who want to re-draw the national boundaries to align them more closely with Serbian and Albanian ethnic identities. Against that there are those who want to build a shared society within the existing boundaries.

WHO IS INVOLVED FROM NORTHERN IRELAND?

The three academics from Northern Ireland are:

Gráinne Kelly, a Ulster University lecturer in Peace and Conflict Studies at INCORE, (International Conflict Research Institute). Grainne specialises in good relations and reconciliation work, and along with her colleague Brandon Hamber produced a model for reconciliation work that was adopted and operationalised by the European Union in a major funding stream worth 1.5 billion euros, fundamentally transforming the way the Programme was managed from 2005-2013.

Paul Nolan, an independent researcher who produced the first three Northern Ireland Peace Monitoring Reports for the Community Relations Council. Subsequently Paul returned to QUB as a Research Fellow and was lead researcher on a study of the flags protest. Along with his colleague Dominic Bryan he went on to produce a policy document on the display of flags. Paul continues to research politics, culture and public policy in Northern Ireland.

Professor Mari Fitzduff from Brandeis University, Boston. Mari is an international conflict resolution specialist who was previously the first director of the NI Community Relations Council, and the first director of INCORE. She is also the editor of *Public Policies in Shared Societies*. Using examples drawn from over 50 countries this book explores how governance, economic, security, health, business, environmental, and educational institutions are adapting their policies and practices to create more cohesive and peaceful societies.

HOW DOES THIS PROJECT WORK?

The project has been designed as a shared learning experience. It is intended that it will run for a five year period, subject to sufficient funding being raised. The opening residential seminar took place at the Arab-Jewish peace centre, Givat Haviva, in Israel in October 2018. The next residential event is planned to take place in Kosovo between September 10th and

16th this year. The format allows each country to describe its experiences, exploring both the achievements and the frustrations, and to engage in discussions with the other partners. An annual report will be prepared each year distilling the learning from the sessions. It is our hope that, along with the NI academics, two representatives from BCC will attend the 2019 event in Kosovo.

FINANCES

At present there are not funds for the whole five year period, but the costs for the first year have been put up by the German Peace Academy, situated at the University of Koblenz-Landau. Funding for future years is being sought from the EU Horizon 2020 project and other funding bodies.

RISKS AND BENEFITS FOR BELFAST CITY COUNCIL

The benefits for BCC are:

- The opportunity to engage in an international exploration of shared society issues, to present its work and to learn from others. At the very least it will provide new lenses through which it can view its own practice.
- A partnership with NI academics who are interested in recording the journey of the Council in shared society work.

There no obvious risks, other than the criticisms that attend any attempt at international work. None of the costs will be borne by Belfast rate-payers.